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California Rep. Thomas comes out on top in highway bill, bases

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WASHINGTON - Bakersfield easily outstripped every other California municipality in special projects in Congress' new transportation bill. Then last week, the military base closing commission moved some 2,000 Navy workers from the Southern California coast to the inland desert region of Kern County east of Bakersfield.

Winners and losers in both deals attribute these conquests in part to one man - House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Thomas.

"Apparently, logic doesn't count when a powerful Republican is involved," said Rep. Brad Sherman, D-Calif., who was backing the Ventura County Navy base that lost out to Kern's Naval air weapons station. Thomas, 63, in his 27th year in Congress, is at the height of his power as head of the committee that oversees top Bush administration priorities, including tax cuts and Social Security. Under Republican rules, the smart, prickly and independent legislator is in the last of three two-year terms as Ways and Means chairman.

With the highway bill and the base closure process both before Congress for the first time in years, Thomas lobbied hard for his home district and came out on top.

Kern County, population 735,000, is getting nearly \$1,000 per resident in special projects in the highway bill - more than double the \$420 per resident of second-place San Francisco County, according to an Associated Press analysis.

Those wins were capped when, after lobbying by Thomas, the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission voted last week to oppose a staff recommendation and move weapons research work from Naval Base Ventura County 120 miles inland to Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake, which had lost roughly 3,000 jobs in the last round of base closings.

"Our congressman, Bill Thomas, certainly had an impact," said Phil Arnold, co-chairman of the China Lake Defense Alliance. "That certainly could offset all of the other congressional interventions, for sure." Thomas declined to be interviewed for this story. Through a spokesman, he issued a statement defending the way he advocated on behalf of his district.

"I believe in, and support, the (base closings) process. It is impartial, and for anyone to say otherwise is impugning the process," Thomas said. As far as the highway projects were concerned, Thomas said, he "worked through the legislative process, conveying the important infrastructure improvements of these projects."

Thomas secured three major highway projects worth at least \$100 million each, including a \$330 million freeway project designed to smooth traffic flow in Bakersfield, California's 11th largest city with a population of 290,000. Thomas also got \$140 million for a Bakersfield Beltway System and \$100 million for construction on a state highway that runs east-west into town.

According to people who've been in recent meetings with Thomas, the congressman has signaled the time was right to push hard for Kern County, which spans the southern San Joaquin Valley, the southern end of the Sierra Nevada and the western edge of the Mojave Desert.

In Bakersfield last week, Thomas told a joint luncheon of the Chamber of Commerce and Realtors Association: "If I'm going to do something, now's the time to do it," said Stanley E. Clark, a political science professor at California State University, Bakersfield, who was in the audience.

At a meeting last year about regional goods-movement transportation needs, Thomas said, in effect: "You're first in line after me," according to Robert Phipps, an administrative analyst at the Kern Council of Governments, and **Mark Pisano, executive director of the Southern California Association of Governments, who were both there.**

Thomas said through an aide that he made clear to meeting participants that he was joking. **Pisano said he didn't view Thomas' comment as negative.**

"I meet with congresspeople from all over the country, and they indicate, 'OK, you've got a problem there, and I'm willing to work with goods movement ... but my major focus in this legislation are projects for my district,'" Pisano said. "Every congressman that I met with basically told me the same thing."